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ABSTRACT

While in the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russian was emphasized at the expense of English, now the learning of English is encouraged. Students who learn English begin studying in primary school, continue into middle school, with the more talented of the politically qualified getting further study in Chinese institutions of higher learning and some being sent to the United Kingdom. As a member of the United Nations and seeking a major role among Third World nations, the PRC recognizes the need to communicate with foreign countries and the value of English for that purpose. The students of English are made aware of the need to be able to tell people of other countries about Chinese developments and points of view. In addition to teaching languages in schools and work places, the regime is also offering English (and other foreign languages) by radio to the general public. Though the extent of this programming is not known, radio stations in the major cities apparently offer regular lessons and printed instruction booklets to listeners. All domestic teaching materials must meet strict standards, which means emphasis on political content. Teaching methods, too, concentrate on the immediate task of developing the language skills students will need to "spread the revolution." (Author/CLK)

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RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

U.S. Information Agency — Research Service

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THE STUDY OF ENGLISH IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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SUMMARY

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is encouraging the learning of English. In the early years of the PRC, Russian was emphasized at the expense of English. Now it is the reverse.

Students who learn English begin studying in primary school, continue into middle school, with the more talented of the politically qualified getting further study in Chinese institutions of higher learning and a select few even being sent to the United Kingdom.

As a member of the United Nations and seeking a major role among Third World nations, the PRC recognizes the need to communicate with foreign countries and the value of English for that purpose. The students of English are made aware of the need to be able to tell people of other countries about Chinese developments and points of view.

In addition to teaching languages in schools and work places, the regime is also offering English (and other foreign languages) by radio to the general public. Though the full extent of this programming is not known, radio stations in the major cities are said to be offering regular lessons and even printed instruction booklets to listeners.

All domestic teaching materials must meet strict standards, which means the emphasis must be on political content. From teaching materials available, it would appear that it is more important to be able to quote the thoughts of Chairman Mao than to ask the time of day. Teaching methods, too, concentrate on the immediate task of developing the language skills students will need to "spread the revolution."

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN ENGLISH

The study of English, once discouraged in the People's Republic of China, is being officially fostered again. Not only are classes being held in schools at all levels, but lessons are being offered in communes, factories, hospitals and army installations. Perhaps the largest number of students is being reached by widely scattered radio stations offering "spare time" English lessons. In Shanghai, alone, 250,000 copies of a beginning English textbook were printed for use in a program offered by the Shanghai Municipal People's Broadcasting Station.[1] And it is all being done "for the sake of revolution."[2]

Although one informed observer believes that about 80 per cent of the Chinese studying a foreign language are learning English,[3] considerable emphasis is being given to other languages as well. At the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages nine other languages are offered, with greatest attention being given to French, German, Spanish and Japanese, in that order. Russian, which was the sole foreign language taught when the Institute opened in December 1949, ranks somewhere among Albanian, Arabic, Greek and Italian today.[4]

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[1] Ta Kung Pao, Hong Kong, November 26, 1973.

[2] Kiangsu Provincial Radio broadcast, September 17, 1974, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

[3] A group of American linguists, under the sponsorship of the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, visited the PRC in October-November 1974. This estimate was made orally by a member of the delegation in an informal discussion upon his return.

[4] From a taped conversation in October-November 1974 between the staff of the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages and members of the American Linguistics Delegation.

As in all other fields in China today, politics plays a preeminent role in the PRC's English-teaching program. Correct ideology is the foremost qualification for enrollment in an institution of higher learning;[1] political reasons are invariably cited by students for wanting to study English; and its role certainly is obvious in the content of textbooks.

Diana Lary, an Englishwoman who taught at Peking Foreign Languages Institute for several years just before the Cultural Revolution, reported that the explanation invariably given by students for their interest in a foreign language was a quote credited to Karl Marx: "A foreign language is a useful tool in the class struggle." Miss Lary pointed out that by "class struggle," the students mean not the one going on in China today, but the international struggle.[2]

An Australian, Colin Mackerras, who also taught at the Institute from 1964 to 1967, wrote, "My students had no doubt about why they were learning English. Here is a quotation from a Grade 2 text I was asked to teach: 'A year ago, although I was interested in the English language, I wasn't clear about its usefulness. I think I have a better idea of that now. I study English so that I will be able to know what is going on outside our country, to tell our friends abroad what is happening in China and to help the oppressed people of the world in their struggle against imperialism and their longing for freedom and happiness.'"[3]

Public school education in the major urban areas of the People's Republic today is a 10-year experience, with five years of primary schooling and a similar number of years of middle schooling. In major urban primary schools, foreign language instruction is reportedly offered in the last three years and throughout all five years of middle school. Considerably less is known about education in rural areas. However, some agricultural commune middle schools only provide three years of education, so any foreign language instruction obviously would be shorter.[4]

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[1] China Observed, Colin Mackerras and Neale Hunter, New York and Washington, Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1968, p. 59.

[2] "Teaching English in China," Diana Lary, The China Quarterly, No. 24, October-December 1965, p. 2.

[3] China Observed, op cit, p. 57.

[4] Draft of The Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages, American Linguistics Delegation, following their visit to the PRC, October-November 1974.

One middle school for which some firsthand information is available is Seventh High School, Chengchou Municipality, Honan Province. Founded in 1952 as a training school for peasants, Seventh High was made a regular middle school eight years later. Its student body of 880 then has now grown to 1,780. Faculty and staff total 146. Subjects listed by a spokesman, presumably in order of importance, include politics, Chinese language, mathematics, foreign languages, physical science, chemistry, biology and history. English is studied three periods per week for five years.[1]

In one Peking middle school, "39 of the 41 classes into which the 2,200 students were divided were studying English as their foreign language."[2] The other two were studying Russian.

Students selected to pursue foreign language studies beyond the middle school level do so in normal colleges, universities and language institutes. No overall statistics of enrollment are available, but there are some data on individual schools.

The Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages, previously mentioned, had, in the fall of 1974, a student body of 1,685, most of whom, since 1972, have been selected from among workers, peasants and soldiers. Their ages range from 18 to 24. Special attention is given to the training of girls and national minorities.

There are four steps toward admission. The student must first himself apply; he must then be "recommended by the masses of the workers," get the approval of the leadership of the organization from which he originates, and finally, be approved by the Institute's authorities.

The aim of the Institute is to "train workers with socialist consciousness and culture. In accordance with Mao's teaching, educational policy must enable everyone who receives education to develop morally, intellectually and physically."[3]

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[1] From a taped conversation in October-November 1974 between the staff of Seventh High School and members of the American Linguistics Delegation.

[2] "American Linguists Visit China," W. P. Lehmann, The Linguistics Reporter, March 1975, p. 5. Although these figures suggest unusually large classes, the author was no more specific.

[3] From a taped conversation in October-November 1974 between the staff of Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages and American linguists.

The senior Foreign Languages Institute in the PRC is in Peking. It was founded in 1942 in a communist-controlled area. The Institute had some 3,000 students studying nearly 30 languages at the time when academic instruction ceased in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution.[1] Enrollment figures since reopening in the early 1970's are unknown.

From the very beginning, the Chinese communists have placed great emphasis on mass participation in almost every activity, from work in agriculture to study of Mao's thoughts. After the phasing out of the Cultural Revolution, it was decided that there should be mass study of English, even if only in "spare time," and radio was chosen as the medium. While it is not known whether all of China's radio stations carry English-language lessons, visiting specialists were told in late 1974 that radio stations in every major city do.[2]

The pioneer in this venture was Shanghai City Radio, which in cooperation with Shanghai Normal University, launched a half-hour daily English-language program in March 1972. Each lesson is broadcast in the early morning, at noon, early evening and late evening, making instruction available to almost anyone. New lessons are offered each Monday, Wednesday and Friday with repeat broadcasts on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and a review of the week's work on Sunday. The first printing of the beginner's textbook used in this program totaled 250,000 copies, of which it was duly noted that "If computed on the basis (of) one copy per person, this figure represents nearly one fortieth of the total population of Shanghai."[3] In the fall of 1973 an intermediate class was launched, and the beginner's course was repeated. A teaching research group at Shanghai Normal University compiled a two-volume text for the second level, of which 200,000 copies were printed. The Shanghai radio station also offers French and Japanese.[4]

A similar program was begun by Radio Peking's City Service on October 1, 1972, offering four 40 minute broadcasts daily between 4:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m.[5] Other stations known to be broadcasting English lessons are

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[1] China Observed, op. cit., p. 55.

[2] The Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages, op. cit., p. 27.

[3] Ta Kung Pao, Hong Kong, November 26, 1973.

[4] Developments, Broadcasting & Press Communications, FBIS, May 21, 1973.

[5] Ibid, October 20, 1972.

Hupeh People's Broadcasting Station,[1] Wuhan People's Broadcasting Station,[2] Anhwei Provincial Service,[3] Foochow Radio,[4] Canton City Service,[5] Kiangsu Provincial Radio[6] and Sining Tsinghai Provincial Service.[7]

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[1] Hupeh People's Broadcasting Station, November 23, 1972, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Anhwei Provincial Service, January 23, 1973, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

[4] Foochow Provincial Service, June 16, 1973, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

[5] Developments, Broadcasting & Press Communications, FBIS, May 21, 1973.

[6] Kiangsu Provincial Service, September 17, 1974, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

[7] Sining Tsinghai Provincial Service, November 11, 1974, monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

A LOOK AT TEACHING MATERIALS[1]

In line with contemporary foreign-language teaching programs in other countres, English teaching in the PRC concentrates on developing language skills for limited practical or functional purposes -- which in this case are defined by the regime. Since politics plays such a dominant role in the lives of all Chinese, it is not surprising to see it reflected in the materials used in teaching English. It is not enough to be able to quote the thoughts of Chairman Mao in Chinese; a student is required to learn them in English or whatever other foreign language he may be studying. Long before he learns enough English to find his way to the corner grocery store, the student learns to say, "Long live Chairman Mao!"

Given this highly politicized nature of Chinese society, teachers and students of English have experienced difficulty in deciding on the propriety of teaching certain words. In 1971, Peking University teachers arbitrarily labeled certain words as political terms, livelihood terms, etc. In so doing such ostensibly non-political words as "beauty," "stroll" and "scenery" were taboo because they were considered to be associated with the bourgeois way of life. "With regard to such indispensable words as 'spring,' 'summer,' 'autumn' and 'winter,' they could only be taught in a manner to describe the cold winter in Heilungkiang or the hot summer on Hainan Island, so that such words would bear certain political meaning."[2]

Apparently realizing that they were putting themselves in an untenable position, the University's Educational Revolution Group reversed themselves and declared, "A large number of basic words must be used in speaking day-to-day language, even in dealing with political matters. For this reason in teaching foreign languages, we should teach not only political terms and phrases, but also words, phrases and idioms to be used in daily life, in religious affairs, and in general practice. We should teach the students even some of the terms used by the enemy to smear and attack us, so that we would know how to expose the enemy and defend ourselves."[3]

But pragmatism doesn't always prevail. Peking Foreign Languages Institute officials rejected a text on Tien An Men Square because one sentence referred to the Great Hall of the People as a "yellow building with gray pillars" instead of as "the most magnificent building in the world," the communist-approved description.[4]

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[1]Teaching materials currently in use in the PRC are difficult for foreigners to obtain. This analysis is based on five volumes used in Peking middle schools, two volumes used by Shanghai City Radio and three supplements to those volumes, and several reports monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

[2]People's Daily, August 24, 1972.

[3]People's Daily, August 24, 1972.

[4]"Teaching English in China," op cit., p. 3.

A middle school student in Peking studying English will read material on such subjects as "The Red Sun," "The Best Weapon is Mao Tse-tung Thought," "Workers and Peasants work for the Revolution," "We are Chairman Mao's Red Guards," "The End of a U.S. Pilot," "Drive for the Revolution," "The First Time I Saw Karl Marx" and many similar titles. Of 53 lessons scanned, 38 of them make some reference to Chairman Mao.

Only two lessons are without some political significance. One is a review of the alphabet. The second deals with the sun and the moon. "The sun is very very far away from us. It is so far that no one can go there," the story says. "The moon is smaller than the stars, but it is much nearer to us, so it looks bigger." The textbook was published in 1972, three years after American astronauts landed on the moon.

Students who are learning their English from Shanghai radio discover such useful phrases as "the bourgeois careerist, conspirator, double-dealer, renegade and traitor Lin Piao," and a description of Chinese life as improving everyday "just like sesame flowers blooming higher and higher at the joints."

One might question the quality of the instruction offered by Shanghai Radio where new lessons are offered each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and reviewed on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Three of the lessons in one textbook consist of an editorial from People's Daily, "Carry the Struggle to Criticize Lin Piao and Confucius Through to the End," in which 191 new words and expressions are introduced. Among them are "opportunist," "usurp," "swindler," "theoretical," "subvert," "vilify," "bluster," "strategic," "retrogress," "emancipate," "fetish" and "orientation."

While most of the lesson materials follow this pattern, students in higher-level institutions have limited access to selected non-Chinese originated publications. These include items from The New York Times, the Manchester Guardian, the Economist, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, British Worker and Monthly Review. The Linguistics Delegation was told that the students also have books by Edgar Snow, Anna Louise Strong, Mark Twain and Charles Dickens.[1]

A spokesman at Sian Normal College agreed with a suggestion that the students ought to read present-day literature so they can learn modern, popular English, but he gave no indication that such materials would be made available.[2]

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[1] From a taped conversation in October-November 1974 betweeen the staff of Sian Normal College and members of the American Linguistics Delegation.

[2] Ibid.

TEACHING METHODS

In methods, as in materials, language teaching currently emphasizes developing the skills needed for practical -- in this case, political -- purposes.

The pattern of teaching English in higher institutions varies somewhat among the schools. However, a spokesman at Peking University summarized the system as follows:[1]

> Before the Cultural Revolution the teaching was rather redundant and stylistic. Theory was cut off from practice. We gave much attention to English literature to the neglect of language learning.... Sometimes they had some knowledge of English literature and they had learned many big and archaic words. Probably they could recite Shakespeare, but they could not express a simple idea in English... To change this we have instituted many changes since the Cultural Revolution.
>
> First, we try to combine our teaching with present-day struggles and to relate our teaching closely with the realities of our socialist system....For example, a teacher will develop a lesson devoted to a commune. After students have studied the text, the students will go to the commune to act as interpreters. Sometimes they will stay in the commune for two or three months. While there, they learn the realities of commune life and work from the peasants. At the same time they continue their study of English. During such a period of field study, they will focus on agriculture. They learn to describe (in English) a commune - how it is organized and how it functions....This effort to put the students in real life communications situations and expose them to the realities of life of the workers, peasants and soldiers is referred to as the "Open Door Way of Teaching and Learning."
>
> Secondly, our teaching material is prepared in accordance with the teachings of Chairman Mao. "Less but essential."....

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[1] The Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages, op. cit, p. 5-8.

> Before the Cultural Revolution much emphasis was placed on grammar....Now, we don't have a separate grammar course. In our text we limit grammatical explanations to those which are needed by Chinese students learning English. In this way we combine theory and practice.

Prior to the Revolution great emphasis was focused on the teacher, classroom and textbook. Now they are not ignored, but greater attention is reported to be given to concentrating education on the student and the needs of the socialist revolution, with teacher, classroom and textbook available to help the students to overcome learning problems.[1]

In the textbooks available for this study, pronunciation of English words is explained with the use of the International Phonetic Association's (IPA) alphabet. This was somewhat surprising because the IPA alphabet has never enjoyed the acceptance linguists elsewhere apparently had hoped for and because in explaining the pronunciation of Chinese words by means of Roman letters, the Chinese use another indigenous, phonetic system known as "pin-yin."

[1] The Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages, op cit., p. 9.

EXTERNAL CONTACTS IN THE ENGLISH-TEACHING FIELD

Though possessing a common written language, the Chinese for centuries have struggled to communicate among themselves verbally using dozens of dialects. Since early in the 20th century the Chinese have been trying to standardize their spoken language, so it is not surprising that they have decided to teach only one version of English--the British variety.[1]

Early in 1973, the Chinese ordered English-language courses from the British Broadcasting Corporation, including records, tapes, pamphlets and textbooks, and specialized courses on the English used in aviation and science. A spokesman for the BBC said that "it would appear that the Chinese authorities prefer 'English English' rather than have their diplomats and other travelers using the American variety. Presumably the British brand is deemed more politically acceptable and presumably non-aligned in terms of super power diplomacy."[2]

The Chinese have also, over the years, recruited teachers from the United Kingdom and Australia to teach English in the various institutions of higher learning and most recently have been sending a limited number of their top students for further study of English in the U. K.

The American influence has been much more modest. The PRC and the United States did exchange Chinese and English teaching materials in accordance with an agreement reached during President Nixon's visit to Peking in February 1972. The Voice of America began broadcasting English lessons to China in January 1973, and during the first five months of these broadcasts received letters from more than 100 listeners scattered throughout China. However, when asked whether people listen to British or American broadcast language programs, Chinese officials replied, "that these were not suitable to the needs of Chinese students."[3]

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[1] The Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages, op. cit., p. 13.

[2] Manchester Guardian, mid-February 1973.

[3] The Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages, op. cit, p. 29.

The group of American linguists who visited China during October-November 1974 presented copies of USIA's English Teaching Forum and other related materials to their various hosts. Sets of English teaching materials also have been sent to Peking and Tsinghua Universities and the Peking Foreign Languages Institute on behalf of a group of American professors who visited China last fall.

Foreign language students in the West customarily learn not only to communicate with others who speak that language but also something of their history and culture. But that is not true of foreign language students in China today. There is no place in the curriculum for English or American literature. Nor does there seem to be much interest in theoretical linguistics. "The principal energies of Chinese linguists are now directed at practical matters to such an extent that linguistics in the PRC might well be labeled applied."[1]

The major languages are taught primarily to provide the necessary staff for translating and interpreting. English and other foreign languages are essential tools, the Chinese realize, if they are to achieve their claimed purpose of spreading revolution.[2]

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[1] "American Linguists Visit China," op. cit., p. 11.

[2] China Observed, op cit., p. 59.